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WOMEN'S AUXILIARY  
TO THE  
AMERICAN SCENIC AND HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION SOCIETY

A Historic Sketch  
— of —  
Certain Defenses  
of New York City  
during the War of  
— 1812 - 1815 —

WITH  
AN ACCOUNT OF  
THE UNVEILING OF A TABLET ERECTED  
BY THE AUXILIARY



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A HISTORIC SKETCH

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A HISTORIC SKETCH  
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Our second war with Great Britain, which decided forever the independence of the United States, greatly affected the citizens of New York. In spite of the fact that no engagement was fought around that town, with pick-axe, shovel and spade, they hastened to the defense of the city and showed themselves full of patriotic zeal and no unworthy descendants of their Revolutionary fathers.

Washington, the seat of the Government, the center of interest, had been invaded (August, 1814,) by the enemy. President Madison and his Cabinet had fled. The White House and Capitol were in flames and the situation was, indeed, critical. To add to the alarm and consternation a British fleet appeared off Sandy Hook and it seemed as if

New York was to share the fate of Washington.

The invasion of the British was apprehended from four points: first, by way of Sandy Hook; second, troops landing on the rear of Long Island and crossing to Brooklyn; third, by a land and naval force down the Sound occupying Brooklyn Heights, commanding the City and Governor's Island; fourth, the attack most feared was from Ward's Island to Harlem Heights.

An address was issued by the Committee, Nicholas Fish, Chairman, to the citizens of New York exempt from military duty. It said in part:

“Rally around the standard of your country and sooner let us die in the last ditch than tamely and cowardly surrender this delightful city into the hands of an invading foe. Discard for a while party bickerings which disturb the social harmony which ought to exist at this momentous crisis. Those who will not defend their country in times of danger like the present, in their veins does not run one drop of American blood, nor does

one American sentiment inhabit their breasts. Upon such men we do *not* call.

“We *do* invite every American exempt from military duty to sign the roll that will be prepared for the purpose of forming a company of artillery for defense of his city.

“All editors who are favorable will insert this twice.”

In response to this call in four days 3,000 citizens were at work. Even newspapers suspended publication for a few days.

Among the prominent men serving on this Committee were Mayor DeWitt Clinton, Nicholas Fish and Henry Rutgers of wide experience gained in the Revolutionary War. This Committee of Defense met daily at City Hall.

Various societies responded. The Free Masons worked on the defenses in Brooklyn, gathering at sunrise in front of City Hall. In August the weather was so warm that many asked to work by the full moon and the “Moonrise Workers” were organized.

Thirty-eight years before in the same month from these very Heights Washington

had withdrawn his army from under the eyes of the British, and had brought it in safety across the East River to New York; and the “Moonrise Workers” in August, 1814, were as eager to defend their liberties and responded to the call with the same patriotic spirit as their predecessors had shown. Six hundred strong they worked, succeeded by the “Sunrise Workers.” The Masons gave a day, assembling in front of City Hall, which was the rallying place. Grand Master De-Witt Clinton led 1,000 men to Brooklyn. A very quaint song was written at this time by an elderly gentleman of the order who had two sons in the War and was sung while dinner was served, as follows:

“Hail! children of light whom the charities send,

Where the bloodhounds of Britain are shortly expected,

Who your country, your wives, your firesides to defend,

On the summit of Brooklyn have ramparts erected,

Firm and true to the trade,  
Continue your aid,

‘Till the Topstone with shouting triumphant  
is laid.

The Free and Accepted will never despair,  
Led on by their worthy Grand Master and  
Mayor.

For me, whose dismissal must shortly arrive,  
To Heaven I prefer this my fervent petition,  
May I never America’s freedom survive,  
Nor behold her disgraced by a shameful sub-  
mission,

And though righteously steeled, if at last she  
must yield,

May my sons do their duty and die in the  
field!

But the Free and Accepted will never despair  
Led on by their worthy Grand Master and  
Mayor.”\*

About this time Fitz Greene Halleck com-  
posed a poem on Iron Greys to be sung to  
the tune of “Adams and Liberty,” published  
in the New York Gazette.

Besides the Masons, there were the Master  
Butchers, who carried a large flag with an  
ox prepared for slaughter and the words,

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\*From R. C. Guernsey’s “History of New York and Vicinity in 1812.”

"Skin me well and dress me neat and send  
me on board the Federal fleet."

The Sons of Erin, the Marine Society, Tammany Society, Society of Tallow Chandlers, Hamilton Society and Columbia Students all helped. (The latter on the fortifications at 123rd Street.)

One of the popular songs of this date was by the author of "The Old Oaken Bucket."

"Pick-axe, shovel and spade,  
Crowbar, hoe and barrow,  
Better not invade,  
Yankees have the marrow."

Historians tell us at this time, that Harlem Heights, which was six miles out of the City, was full of soldiers and fortifications. A boat was run daily to take the volunteer workmen to the defenses built from the Hudson to the Harlem River. This line of defense was chosen because the distance here was short, and money and men were not at command. Beside Block-houses and Stone Towers there were Barrier Gates.

\* There is no better authority on the loca-

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\*Thanks are due Mr. Edward Hagaman Hall for this report.

tion of the landmarks of Manhattan Island at the time of the War of 1812 than John Randel, Jr., the Civil Engineer, who made the "Commissioners Map" for laying out the City Plan above Houston Street. Randel says:

During the War of 1812, the Barrier Gate at McGowan's Pass was connected with the Barrier Gate at Manhattanville Pass by the following military defenses, which were extended across the Island from Harlem River to Hudson River, to wit:

1. Fortifications on Benson's Point near 3rd Avenue and 106th Street;
2. Fort Clinton, between 106th Street and 107th Street and about 170 yards east of 6th Avenue;
3. Fort Fish, between 105th and 106th Streets and about 10 yards east of 6th Avenue;
4. A stone tower, about 14 yards south of 109th Street and 7 yards west of 7th Avenue;
5. A stone tower between 113th and 114th Streets, between 9th and 10th Avenues;

6. A stone tower on the south side of 121st Street and about 110 yards east of 10th Avenue;

7. A stone tower on the south side of 123rd Street, about 54 yards east of 10th Avenue;

8. Fort Haight, at Manhattanville Pass, about 20 yards north of 124th Street and 120 yards east of 11th Avenue.

The foregoing is quoted verbatim, from a historical sketch by him to be found in Valentine's Manual for 1864. It is repeated in the "Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins," Governor and Commander-in-Chief during the War of 1812, published by the State of New York.

The Barrier Gate at McGowan's Pass was at 107th Street about 116 yards east of 6th Avenue. (Same authority).

The Barrier Gate at Manhattanville Pass was at 123rd Street 33 yards west of 11th Avenue. (Same authority).

Columbia students, 100 strong, assisted in these fortifications, marching in a body from the Campus, then at College Place, to 123rd

Street, little thinking that in the future their own college buildings would be in the immediate vicinity of this Fort. Again, this is Revolutionary ground. To the west the heroic General Knowlton fell in the battle of Harlem Heights. Some authorities say this line of fortifications was originally built by the British, then they gradually disappeared until the call of DeWitt Clinton to help in 1812, when they were restored.

In February, 1815, the news that peace was declared with Great Britain reached this country. New York was overjoyed, church bells were rung, cannon fired and Sunday papers of half sheets were issued. For many years the old line of fortifications at Harlem Heights have been of interest to visitors. One by one the defenses have disappeared, but thanks to the protection of Central and Morningside Parks, two are left in a good state of preservation, the one in Central Park and 110th Street and one at 123rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue. When the grading of 123rd Street was attempted, through the personal attention of Hon. John D. Crim-

mins, then Park Commissioner, and F. S. Hamlin, then Deputy Commissioner of Public Works, this site was saved. The street had to be graded and the rock closely drilled without disturbing the old masonry. The citizens at the time these walls were built in 1812 had no cement and used shell-lime, which is still to be seen and shows its durability.

These places have been waiting 90 years to be recognized. In June, 1903, there were signs of these fortifications crumbling away. Through one of the members of the Women's Auxiliary to the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, Park Commissioner Wilcox's attention was called to the matter, he immediately responded, restoring the Tower and so called Block House in Central Park. On Saturday, June 4th, 1904, a suitable tablet was presented to the City by the Women's Auxiliary to the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, with appropriate exercises.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE UNVEILING  
OF THE TABLET.

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The following extract from the Tribune of June 7, 1904, may be of interest. In describing the ceremonies of unveiling the tablet on the remains of the stone tower at 123rd Street, it says, first describing the tablet:

This tablet marks the remains of a stone tower, a part of a line of fortifications extending from the Hudson to the Harlem River, built for the defense of New York by its patriotic citizens during the War of 1812-1815.

Erected by the  
Women's Auxiliary to the American Scenic  
and Historic Preservation Society,  
A. D., 1904.

Part of three walls of this tower still remain, crowning a bluff at the north end of the park, and inside the inclosure thus formed the ceremonies took place, and chairs were set for the visitors. The addresses were de-

livered from the east wall, and on the west wall were gathered the Alexander Hamilton Club, of the City History Club, through the courtesy of Mrs. Robert Abbe, all little girls in white dresses, with American flags, which they waved as they sang "The Star Spangled Banner" and "The Song of New York." The tablet is affixed to the north wall, and was covered with a flag having sixteen stars. This facsimile of the flag used during the War of 1812 was lent for the occasion by Mrs. Richard Henry Greene.

The unveiling ceremonies opened with "Hail Columbia" by a brass band, and the program noted that this air was originally called "General Washington's March," having been first played at his inauguration. The prayer of dedication was offered by the Rev. Robert Mackenzie, pastor of the Rutgers Church, of which Henry Rutgers, a member of the Committee of Defense in the War of 1812, was one of the founders. Addresses were given by the Rev. Merle St. Croix Wright and Dean Kirchwey, of Columbia University Law

School, Columbia students having assisted in building the Harlem Heights fortification. Also Mr. Henry Richard Greene spoke on the flag. Little Miss Frances Emerson Coleman, daughter of Mrs. John C. Coleman, was selected for the honor of unveiling the tablet because it was through Mrs. Coleman's efforts that the remains of the tower were restored.

The tablet was presented to the city by Miss Mary Van Buren Vanderpoel, president of the Women's Auxiliary. "The Star Spangled Banner," was sung, and Hon. J. J. Pallas, the Commissioner of Parks, accepted ~~the tablet~~ on behalf of the City.

Among the societies represented at the unveiling were the Mayflower Society, Colonial Dames, four chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Founders and Patriots, Settlers and Defenders, the Sons of the American Revolution, West End Association, also Barnard College and Columbia College students and descendants of DeWitt Clinton and Henry Rutgers and the Scenic and His-

toric Preservation Society. The tablet committee consisted of Mrs. John Caldwell Coleman, Chairman; Mrs. William Brookfield, Mrs. George Stephenson Bixby, Mrs. Emil L. Boas, Mrs. Richard Henry Greene, Mrs. Virgil P. Humason and Mrs. James E. Pope. Also Miss Mary Van Buren Vanderpoel, President, Ex-officio.

Thanks are due to Hon. John J. Pallas and his associates for their interested co-operation with this committee.

Mrs. John Caldwell Coleman,  
Chairman of Tablet Committee.

June, 1904.  
New York City.





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